

Sri Lankan SEP holds public meeting in tsunami-affected south

Our correspondent
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More than 50 people attended a meeting on the political issues raised by the Asian tsunami organised by Socialist Equality Party (SEP) at the Ambalangoda town hall on February 27. The audience included workers, fishermen, housewives, young people and students, many of whom had been directly affected by the December 26 disaster.

Ambalangoda is a coastal town in the southern Galle district, one of the areas of Sri Lanka badly hit by the tsunami. According to official statistics, the death toll for the district was 4,256. Some 7,032 houses were completely destroyed and another 7,680 dwellings partially damaged. Nearly 100,000 people have been displaced. Tens of thousands, who were employed directly or indirectly in the fishing and tourist industries, have lost their livelihoods and are destitute.

Those who came to the meeting vented their anger at President Chandrika Kumaratunga and her ruling United Peoples' Freedom Alliance (UPFA) over the lack of assistance. More than two months after the disaster, many displaced families either depend on their relatives or live in makeshift tents that offer little protection. Most were fed up with filling out dozens of forms and meeting with officials. One woman declared that she had recently begun burning forms, as filling them out did not bring any assistance to her family.

A father of three children showed his outrage in a different way. He went to a studio and had a photograph taken of himself holding two small polythene bags containing four kilograms of dry rations. He showed it to SEP members and said he wanted it published in a newspaper to show the aid provided by the government to feed his three children for a week.

Concerned at the eruption of angry protests, Kumaratunga has placed relief efforts under the control of the military and imposed emergency rule. When the SEP members tried to interview the refugees at Ambalangoda Gramini Maha Vidyalaya, a school currently being used

as a relief camp, the naval and police officers guarding the camp threatened to arrest them under the emergency law.

On the same day as the SEP meeting, Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa visited Ambalangoda and tried to make a great show of offering 2,000 rupees (\$US20) to select families. Far from pacifying local hostility, Rajapaksa was besieged by frustrated victims demanding government assistance and had to walk out.

Rathnasiri Malalagama, a longstanding SEP member in the area, chaired the meeting. He explained that the meeting was part of a series organised by the SEP and the *World Socialist Web Site* in Sri Lanka and internationally. He explained that the SEP's general secretary Wije Dias had recently addressed meetings in Sydney and Melbourne on the historical and political issues of the Asian tsunami.

Malalagama outlined the serious problems confronting people in the area. "The housing problem is a major one. People at Peraliya, a suburb of Ambalangoda, explained to us the type of housing they are being given. Though the government promised to spend 250,000 rupees on each house, in fact they are spending only 100,000 rupees. The walls are being made of a mixture of sand and cement in the ratio of 9:1, well below proper building standards. One of the families has even refused to occupy their new house. They told us—before they left the area—that the house would collapse over their heads even in a strong wind, let alone a tsunami."

In introducing the main speaker Wije Dias, Malalagama said: "This disaster exemplifies the historical and political problems that workers and the oppressed masses face under capitalist rule. What is needed is a scientific perspective to confront these issues and to provide a progressive socialist solution."

Dias began by explaining that the Asian tsunami had hit countries spanning the Indian Ocean and Arabian Sea without discriminating on the basis of national boundaries

or communal differences. At the same time, he said, we have seen that the ruling elites in the major powers and affected countries have all responded to the tragedy in the same way—with callous indifference for the plight of the victims.

“The damage caused to the fishing industry in South Asia alone, not taking into account the devastation faced by the fishermen and their families, is estimated to be around \$US520 million, according to the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO). Compared to these figures, the paltry sums provided by the US and other imperialist countries demonstrate that the aim of the relief operations is not to end the misery of the victims,” Dias said.

Dias pointed out that the death toll is still rising. On February 1, the official figure for the island was 30,974. “But, 12 days later, people in Matiwala, near this town, had to force the police to empty a clay pit to recover the bodies of 20 ‘missing persons’. This shows how callously the authorities treat the victims of the disaster,” he said.

“At the end of December, President Kumaratunga said that her government planned to begin construction work on houses for displaced people by January 15. She also said that the work is expected to be completed within six months. All this rhetoric has now changed. In her latest statement on February 13, she said that construction will only begin by March 1 and that it will take three years to complete. The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), the other main partner of the ruling coalition, backed her statement, saying it was hard to find materials and skilled labour to build the houses immediately.

“Are these promises going to materialise at all? If we go by the recent news coming from the Task Force for Relief (TAFOR), the whole project is going to be a non-starter. TAFOR says that all the statistics collected so far are now missing from its computers. So much for the dozens of forms filled out by displaced people during the last eight weeks. The implication is that the government is going to write off tens of thousands of men, women and children as having disappeared.

“What we find here is a microcosm of the inherent inability of capitalism to address the basic needs of the working people, even in ordinary times, let alone during a disaster of this scale. This is not due to the lack of material and human resources, but is the result of an economic order that places profit above the social needs of the people. This is what must be changed and it needs a political perspective,” Dias emphasised.

Dias drew attention to growing protests, not only by tsunami victims, but also by other workers and the poor on a variety of social issues. He insisted that what was needed was a political perspective to unite working people.

“When the tragedy struck, the masses joined together, cutting across the communal divisions fostered for decades, and took it upon themselves to provide assistance and support each other. But the ruling elites felt their weakness and reacted by attacking democratic rights and stirring up communal muck to cover up the intensifying attacks on social conditions,” he explained.

“Under conditions in which the so-called peace process with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) is drifting and most of the aid pledges are tied to a peace deal, the government is becoming more and more desperate. Who can believe that in this situation the emergency regulations, now in force in more than half of the island, will not be used against ordinary people who demand that their needs be met immediately?

“This is why demands placed on the government must be combined with a political program to defend the democratic rights and the social conditions of the masses. The SEP’s intervention is to provide such a program based on socialist internationalism to replace capitalist rule with a workers’ and peasants’ government in the form of a socialist republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam,” Dias said in conclusion.

The report opened up a lively discussion on a range of issues, including the peace talks, the LTTE’s proposal for an interim administration and the SEP’s attitude to the democratic rights of minorities. Dias explained that the SEP’s socialist program was based on developing an independent movement of the working class in opposition to both the racist oppression of Tamils by the Colombo government and the LTTE’s anti-democratic and communally-based proposals.



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